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ABSTRACT

This paper provides examples of a variety of phonological, orthographical, and morphological changes in current popular French are noted. They include: dropping of silent vowels in spelling, particularly in advertising and product names; changes in the pronunciation of vowels due to manipulation for product names; combinations of otherwise unrelated words in product names; changes in spelling for the benefit of style in advertising; letters and numbers used to represent words; reduction of words to representative initials; neologisms; nouns used as verbs, but without verb endings; Anglicisms adapted for French slang; reversal of syllables to make new words; new descriptive words for technological advancements; and use of colors to define concepts. (MSE)

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Notes on the Changing Nature of Popular French

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NOTES ON THE CHANGING NATURE OF POPULAR FRENCH "PLUS ÇA CHANGE...." MAIS CE N'EST PLUS LA MÊME CHOSE--RECENT EXAMPLES OF CHANGING USAGE

The French language has long been known for its conservative orthography and the government's projects of establishing commissions for the preservation of traditional French. Even in France, the language is, however, in a constant state of flux, and popular speech and writing reflect these tendencies.

Silent vowels continue to be dropped in popular spelling. The cumbersome -EAU is reduced to -O, thus BATEAU becomes BATO in the name of tour boats on the Seine--the company is the BATOBUS. Through this neologism we now have a bus that floats on the water.

The mute -E at the end of the word is frequently dropped and replaced by the ubiquitous apostrophe--which signals not only the loss of the silent -E, but also any miscellaneous change in a structure. The GUYO MARC'H is a marketing group which almost randomly uses the apostrophe to mark their peculiar modernisation of the word MARCHÉ. The ÉTAP HÔTEL chain drops the silent -E before the silent H/vowel structure. A new brand of car alarm, CODE ALARM drops the -E from the French word ALARME, using a more anglicized form. A natural hair-coloring product is called HERBATINT from HERBE À TINT; the mute -E is dropped and agglomerated into the À. There are literally hundreds of examples of this loss of the mute -E in current French.

The open O, as in BONNE, is replaced by the more easily pronounced closed O as in BEAUNE; this is seen in the names of several shops in that town in Burgundy--a clock store named A LA BEAUNE HEUR' (perhaps also a play on happiness BONHEUR). Similarly a rather elegant souvenir store is named À LA BEAUNE CHOSES (the word Beaune is read as bonne, but there is no attempt to make any adjective agreement).

The verb DÉGRIFFER and related words representing the inexpensive sale of brand-name items with the brand name removed, has given birth to a travel company DÉGRIFTOUR which specializes in inexpensive tours; one notes that the silent -E and the duplicative F have both been cast aside. A second L is dropped in the name of a hotel CECIL'HÔTEL.

Other silent consonants are omitted. A heating company in Chalon-sur-Saône drops the final T from CLIMAT and is named CLIMAFROID. The silent H in HÔTEL is removed in a number of brand names--such as that of the motel chain NOVOTEL.

The soft G is written in its phonetic form of J in a respelling of the word MAGIE in order to form a new brand name for a hair product which should have magical qualities, and thus advertizes MÈCHES OU MAJIMÈCHES?

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The QU diagraph is frequently changed. It is modernized to its phonetic K as is seen in the advertisement for the Korean Kia car ON NE PENSE KA ÇA--the product and advertisements are dominated by the alliterative K sound. In another circumstance the -QUE from BANQUE is modernized to BANC (normally meaning bench) in the BANCASSURANCES savings account publicity which suggests that people save to assure payment of their children's back-to-school expenses.

Letters and numbers are used to represent words. The familiar K7 (cassette) is used everywhere. The words of the musical scale are used for the name of a popular television game show which asks participants to identify songs that are FACILE À CHANTER--the game show is named FA SI LA CHANTER.

Words are reduced to the representative initials. C. G. represents COMPAGNIE GÉNÉRALE, but now those initials are being expanded into words, thus one sees the telephone company named the CÉGÉTEL.

Neologisms abound, and reformed or new words tie two concepts together. A rice-drink product is named RÊV'RIZ; it seems to be a product that one should drink before going to sleep at night. A chain of restaurants on the autoroute is named AUB É PAIN, perhaps referring to the edible berries of the AUBÉPIN (the hawthorne plant), but certainly playing on the positive impact of the words for dawn AUBE and bread PAIN; one also notes that the conjunction ET is reduced to more phonetic É. The -FIQUE termination often connotes a superlative, and the House of Dior uses that to form a neologism, boasting that its designs are DIORIFIQUE.

Nouns are used as verbs, but not always given verbal endings. The public transportation company in Dijon has a slogan for its bus system: QUAND JE BOUGE, JE BUS. Do we continue to QUAND NOUS BOUGEONS, NOUS BUSONS??

Anglicisms continue to move into French, but the French people use them in their own particular ways. One has long been familiar with the use of the present participle as a noun--LE PRESSING for a dry-cleaners, for example. The present participle LE SHAMPOOING in its noun form is now shortened to SHAMP as one sees when a beauty shop advertises SHAMP-COUPE-SÉCHAGE. The French -ERIE ending denoting an establishment, is now added to a variety of English/American words in order to form a French noun--the SANDWICHERIES flourish throughout France. French and English words are combined in set phrases to describe a style that is CHIC ET SWELL which seems to be replacing the descriptor BCBG (BON CHIC BON GENRE)--used to describe those of the upscale areas in Paris. The new car designed by the Swiss Swatch company has a decidely English name; it is the SMART--and is a small, efficient car which does a maximum of 130 km an hour. In a particularly quirky turn to the affirmative, there is a play on the pleasure/pain phrase from English; a BOULANGERIE is named PLAISIRS & PAINS.

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VERLAN and new slang structures change daily, and hundreds of these reversed words are commonly understood-- for example, the slang NÉMO is easily recognized for the word MONNAIE.

New technologies mean that new descriptive words must come into French. The debit card is becoming more broadly used in France and is UNE CARTE À DÉBIT IMMÉDIAT. An IBM advertisement incorporates the @ in an e-mail address, replacing the A, noting that it is LA BONNE @DRESSE. That @ sigla is often referred to as the AÉROBASE or the ESCARGOT RENVERSÉ in French. The large shopping stores known as the GRANDES SURFACES or the SUPERMARCHÉS-the Casinos the Intermarchés--have influenced the noun used to describe the traditional small grocery store which is now often called a SUPERETTE.

In computer technologies, L'INFORMATIQUE, the French government stubbornly insists on maintaining a linguistic structure in French and LE WEB, is allegedly to be called LA TOILE. The early word for a computer mouse, LA PUCE, has long since given way to a translation of the English, becoming LA SOURIS or LA PETITE SOURIS. Many French terms are precise translations from the English--for example, an ÉCONOMISEUR D'ECRAN for a screensaver. Good dictionaries of other French technological vocabulary are found on numerous WEB sites, for example, through the French YAHOO search engine.

Changing environmental conditions have brought new linguistic structures and vocabulary changes. The ever-increasing problem of pollution has brought its own vocabulary. The French now speak of CO-VOITURAGE for car-pooling. A non-polluting car is known as a VOITURE ÉCO and the word PASTILLE is now combined with the ecological color green, thus a PASTILLE VERTE is a sticker which may be attached to officially certified non-polluting cars which have the right to be driven on high pollution days--JOURS DE PIQUE DE POLLUTION. There is also the dreaded CIRCULATION ALTERNÉE when cars whose license plate end in an even number can drive one day and those with an odd number drive the alternate day.

Colors define concepts, and in fashion-conscious France, the ladies who give you parking tickets (P.V.s) are commonly known as LES PERVENCHES--for the periwinkle color of their stylish uniforms.

Brand names now define persons. A young girl, JEUNE FILLE, should obviously wear Levis jeans according to the advertising slogan LEVI'S 534 LE JEAN FILLE. The brand of clothes for young people CHIPPIE--from the English, has now gone full circle and is used as a noun to define smart, sassy, chic young people--QUELLE CHIPPIE! As part of the Cocacolinization of the world, brand names becomes the name for the object. Any young Frenchmen will know that SANTIAGOS or SANTIAGUES are what we call cowboy boots.

Purists will decry these changes, calling them temporary, sneering that they are just a passing fancy and telling us that certainly

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the Académie Française will prevail as it controls academic and governmental writing--but can government control daily language or will modernization continue in spite of its venerable threats?

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